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ABSTRACT

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LITERARY DISCOURSE AND IRONY: SECRET COMMUNION AND THE PACT OF RECIPROCITY

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the characteristics of literary discourse (interaction, dialogism, and reciprocity between authors and readers on the one hand, and the multilayeredness of the levels of discourse, on the other) in their relation to the communication of verbal irony as a form of secret communion, drawing particularly on Sperber and Wilson's approach to the subject. The role of genre-related expectations, the notions of Given and New, and mutual knowledge in comprehension is also touched upon, especially in relation to irony in literary discourse.

1. Introduction

Research undertaken on oral cultures suggests that irony is present in verbal narrative, but only in a limited manner compared to its occurrence in literate cultures. The reason seems to have a lot to do with writing and print, which, as Ong (1976) claims, create the distance between the "person who produces an utterance" and "the person who takes in the utterance." As Ong further argues in his article *From mimesis to irony: the distancing of voice*, the proximity of the live audience to the story teller and their high degree of participation makes it difficult for irony to thrive in the way it does in the multiple layers of written discourse. Thus,

> Oral cultures appropriate knowledge ceremonially and formulaicly, and their verbalisation remains basically conservative and in principle directly accountable to hearers. Verbal attacks in oral cultures, where such attacks are exceedingly frequent, are normally direct and ostentatiously hostile. Their standard form is the ceremonial taunting, name-calling or fluting that is common, it seems, in most if not indeed absolutely all oral cultures. Of course, oral folk are no more virtuous than the literate. Unreliability there well may be in the verbal performance of many speakers in the world of primary (preliterate) orality but unreliability s not vaunted in this world as a major rhetorical device
>
> (Ong 1976: 13-14)

It is this further complication of the situation of the interaction within literary communication which prompts not only the potential for irony but also its occurrence at different levels of discourse. In Booth's terms, irony becomes a kind of 'secret communion' between author and reader. Such a wording reinforces the covert character of irony, its elusiveness, and associative/dissociative, inclusive/exclusive properties (Myers 1977; Kaufer 1977, 1981; Booth 1983), and raises two main questions which I will try to answer in constructing the core of this paper.

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The first question is concerned with finding out what it is that makes the communication of irony a communion, and how secret that communion can be. The second question addresses the participants in the interaction for whom irony is a secret communion as well as those for whom it is a secret conspired in "behind their backs." Both questions aim at linking Sperber and Wilson's approach to irony and communication with literary features of discourse, in an attempt to extend the theory to account for irony in complex discourse situations. The first question will eventually be linked to the notions of effort and effect, in particular, which determine the relevance of a given discourse, while the second will mainly be related to the notions of second-degree and echoic interpretations.

2. Written discourse: dialogism, reciprocity, and comprehension

It might, first, be worth emphasising the interactive nature of writing. Far from being autonomous and decontextualised, written texts have writers who, just like speakers, have their receivers in mind. The discourse is shaped according to the demands of the communicative situation as well as the readers' expectations. Every part of the structure of the text stands as a witness to the convergence of the writer's purpose in the activity with the provisions she makes for the reader.[1] Stubbs says that it might be possible to regard written language as non-interactive only if

> discourse is seen merely as the realization of sequences of propositions which could be represented in the predicate and propositional calculus: semantic content plus logical relations. However, anything else is interactive. That is, any devices for presenting the semantic content are interactive, since they design discourse for its hearers and readers
>
> (Stubbs 1983: 212)

This section will try to demonstrate why and how written language is interactive and context-bound, especially in the light of Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and Nystrand's notion of reciprocity. This property constitutes the basis on which the investigation of the production and recognition of irony is to be pursued in the following sections.

2.1 The dialogic aspect of written discourse

To claim that writing is a monologic activity does not imply that it is also monologic in its communicative structure. For every time one engages in writing, there has to be some reason or purpose for undertaking the enterprise in the first place. There has also to be a reader (even if it is oneself, as in the case of diaries or reminder notes) in the eventual context of use. The potential reader's knowledge and expectations determine to a great extent the form and the content that the written text will eventually take. Widdowson (1975) talks, for instance, about the writer's conversing, during the writing activity, with an imaginary reader.

Bakhtin talks about the "internal dialogism of the word... every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates" (1981: 279). He equally asserts that every prose discourse

> cannot fail to be oriented toward the "already uttered", the "already known", the "common opinion" and so forth. The dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of any discourse. It is the natural orientation of any living discourse.
>
> (Bakhtin loc. cit.)

Moreover, he emphasises the social character of language and the individual's propensity to "share being." In a quotation cited in Nystrand (1986: 33), he claims that

> the word is always oriented toward an addressee, toward what the addressee might be ... each person's inner world, and thought has its stabilised social audience that comprises the environments in which reasons, motives, values, and so on are fashioned ... the word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant ... Each and every word expresses the one relation to the other. I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately from the point of view of the community to which I belong. A word is a territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor.
>
> (Bakhtin 1973: 85-86, original emphasis)

Bakhtin's dialogism does not stop at the level of production, however; it also encompasses understanding and what he labels "active response." For him, the two are "dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other" (Bakhtin 1981: 283). He notes that active responsive understanding is the only way for meaning to be realised: "The speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on an alien territory, the listener's, apperceptive background" (loc. cit.). Hence, for an act of communication to be successful, an acknowledgement of the need of the addressee for active responsive understanding has to be made by the addresser in relation to what she has to say. A failure in keeping up with this balance can result in misunderstandings, ambiguity and failures of communication.

2.2 Reciprocity, negotiation, and comprehension

Nystrand's view of written discourse falls in line with Bakhtin's. He starts from the premise that it is not only what a writer intends to say which shapes the direction her text takes. It is mostly the "communicative need of writers to balance their own purposes and intentions with the expectations and needs of readers" (Nystrand 1986: 36) which gives a discourse its final shape. In other words, it is the Reciprocity Principle which accounts for understanding and successful communication. Thus defined, this principle can operate only because of the presupposed existence of a "pact of discourse" or "contract," on the one hand, and "negotiation" and the need for establishing and maintaining a "mutual frame of reference" as well as the existence of a "shared mutual knowledge" underlying all communication, on the other.

The Reciprocity Principle is assumed to govern all social acts, including verbal interaction. Hence, Nystrand says that in "any collaborative activity the participants orient their action on certain standards which are taken for granted as rules of conduct by the social group to which they belong" (Nystrand 1986: 48). Citing Cox (1978:21), he argues that such an orientation leads them to develop a certain co-awareness "not only of what the other is doing saying and so on, and of what I am doing, but also of how what I am doing appears to the other, and even what I must do to communicate more clearly" (loc. cit.).

Clarity in communication or explicitness is thus not so much a matter of saying everything and in well-formed complete sentences. Given the pact of discourse aiming at understanding between the participants and linking what is to be said with their needs and expectations, explicitness is instead a matter of "striking a balance between what needs to be said and what can be assumed." Hence, Nystrand adds,

> writers must initiate and sustain conditions of reciprocity between themselves and their readers if their communication is to be coherent. Texts function and are lucid to the extent that this balance is maintained; they are unclear and dysfunctional to the extent that it is not.
>
> (Nystrand 1986: 72)

It is knowing what to be explicit about that counts if efficient communication is to be achieved. The respective concerns of the writer for expression and the reader for comprehension (ibid.: 95) are what needs to be reconciled for a text to be explicit enough for the purposes of successful communication. Ambiguity and clarity are in fact "not intrinsic qualities of text but rather aspects of agreement on the meaning between conversants" (loc.cit.). Moreover, an "explicit text is not a text whose meaning is completely embodied in the text but rather a text about which relevant contextual evidence is not in dispute" (ibid.: 96). Whether a text is written or spoken, whether it is about philosophy or is a piece of gossip, explicitness remains a function of the demands made on it by the participants, both to express themselves and to understand each other. For instance, legal texts, for all their attempts to say everything in minute detail are not only boring for non-specialists, but do not seem to be easily intelligible either. A word like *Entrance* or *Exit* above a door, on the other hand, for all its brevity and cryptic appearance is as explicit and as intelligible as any person speaking the language would expect from efficient communication. Where such communication is perceived as "a matter of operating on and transforming a shared knowledge base" (ibid.: 41), being aware of what is known is a necessary step towards knowing what to say.

Following Sperber and Wilson (1982), Nystrand rejects the idea of mutual knowledge as a prerequisite for comprehension and considers it instead as a result of that very process. He further contends that in their quest to make sense of what the other participant says or in their negotiation of meaning, people first make sure that a mutual frame of reference has been established between them; a measure that serves to contextualise their expressions and establish an equal common footing on which they can start that expression. They would then proceed with their contributions. But as soon as a disturbance takes shape in the course of the exchange (in the form of a new or unclear contribution), the mutual frame of reference is endangered and can no longer be maintained. A call for re-negotiation thus has to be carried out in the form of a re-establishment of a new frame of reference and a new attempt at its maintenance. In Nystrand's terms,

> discourse is not so much the encoding and the transmission of what the speaker knows as it is a set of procedures whereby the conversants focus jointly on various aspects of what they know for the purpose of examining and perhaps transforming this knowledge.
>
> (Nystrand 1986: 44)

In writing, where the shaping of the text is the responsibility of the writer during the monologic activity, she is faced with the necessity of making crucial decisions about what has to be said and what can be assumed, i.e. what can be treated as given and what should be new. The eventual context of use, the further dimension to which a text has to be attuned if comprehension is to be achieved, has equally to be taken into consideration by the writer. Nystrand notes that

> skilled writers do not modify what they have to say in light of their readers' knowledge or lack thereof; what they actually write - indeed, what they have to say - is largely a result of this situation.
>
> (ibid.: 120)

Whether a definition will have to follow the mention of the word 'semiotics,' for instance, and whether the issues mentioned in relation to it need to be 'buttressed' within a particular text depends to a great extent on what the writer expects the knowledge of her readers' topical knowledge to be. But it depends, moreover, on the function the text will be performing at the time of its reading. Being attuned to that context of use conditions the content of a text as well as its reading. According to Nystrand writers have to perform three tasks, in tune with their readers' comprehension strategies during the composition process. He thus claims that

> first, they must establish a footing by identifying common ground ... In addition, they must contextualise new information - buttressing those points of text which, if not treated, would threaten the established balance of discourse between writers and their readers. And finally (though not necessarily last), they must carefully mark relevant text boundaries to indicate conceptual, narrative, and other shifts, and to break the text into manageable information units.
>
> (ibid.: 101)

Reading, on the other hand, seems to be carried out by a process of elimination. The different layers of context contribute in narrowing down whatever expectations readers might have or develop about the meaning of a given text. The process of elimination continues during the reading process itself, Nystrand (1986: 57) argues, answering the readers' questions "What sort of text?" (genre), "What sort of topic?" (what the text is about), and "What sort of comment?" (what the writer wants to say about the topic). This top-to-bottom approach (from genre to comment) constrains and progressively narrows down the meaning possibilities to be expected within the following level. When the writer's organisation of a given text follows these steps, the reader is confronted with no particular difficulties in reconstructing the meaning of the communication.

2.3 Summary

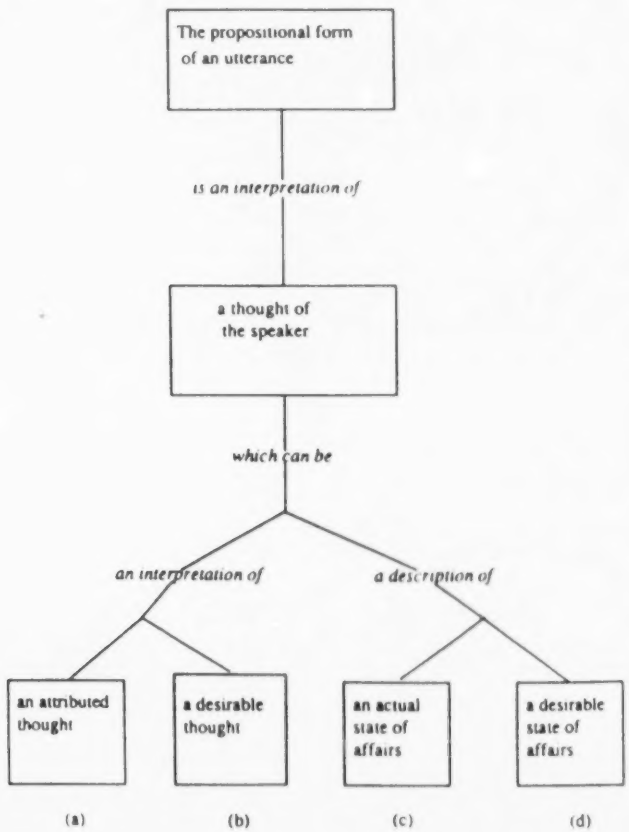
To sum up, a writer charges a text with meanings fashioned in accordance with her primary need for expression, the purpose of that expression, and conformity to the Reciprocity Principle. These potential meanings, in Halliday's terminology, can be actualised into an instantial meaning only through the intervention of a reader whose needs and expectations, coupled with the interpretative context in which the process takes place, are responsible for the interpretation given to the text. "Texts are like electric circuits," Nystrand observes, "There is potential but no arc of meaning until some reader completes the circuit" (1986: 43).

Proceeding from this premise, it is worth considering the way to communicate a problematic phenomenon like verbal irony, which is based on saying one thing and meaning another. A plausible perspective on the subject has been provided by Sperber and Wilson within their consideration of communication in general. The implications of their approach for literary discourse in terms of secret communion will be discussed in section 5, and the implications for the participants in this communion in section 6. But first here is a brief review of their approach to irony as presented within the confines of their larger theory of communication (or Relevance Theory).

3. Sperber and Wilson's approach to irony

According to Sperber and Wilson, verbal irony involves the implicit communication of an attitude of disapproval, or mockery. They classify it under the category of utterances which they call "echoic." An ironical utterance for them conforms to the principle of relevance (minimum processing effort for maximum contextual effects) mainly because of the "information it conveys about the attitude of the speaker to the opinion echoed" (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 239). They maintain that an ironical utterance "is one that echoes an actual or possible opinion of a certain person, or type of person, in order to dissociate oneself from it or make fun of it" (Wilson and Sperber 1986: 30). Since they assume that "every utterance is" in the first place "an interpretive expression of a thought of the speaker" (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 231), every utterance can consequently be used in one of two ways: descriptively or interpretively.

When used descriptively, an utterance either describes a state of affairs in the actual world or a state of affairs that is desirable. When used interpretively, it can be either an interpretation of some attributed thought or utterance, or an interpretation of some thought, which it is desirable to entertain in a certain way (cf. figure below, presented in Sperber and Wilson 1986: 232).



Aspects of verbal communication

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Verbal irony falls under the first type of the first category: an interpretation of an attributed thought or utterance. The thought of the speaker which is interpreted by the utterance is itself an interpretation of a thought of somebody other than the speaker (or of the speaker in the past). This kind of utterance is treated as a second-degree interpretation of someone else's thought and is believed to achieve relevance in two ways. First, as in the case of reported speech, the utterance is relevant because it informs the hearer of the fact that a certain person has said something or thinks something. Second, in other cases, relevance is achieved by informing the hearer of the fact that the speaker has in mind what a particular person said and has, besides, a certain attitude towards it. The speaker's interpretation of that other person's thought is considered relevant in itself. Interpretations achieving relevance in this manner (that is, depending on other's utterances) are seen as echoic (Sperber and Wilson 1986).

It is worth noting that for an utterance to be echoic, it does not need to interpret a thought that is attributable to a particular individual. What makes an utterance echoic is not necessarily its earlier enunciation: it can still be considered echoic while uttered for the first time. Sperber and Wilson explain that the

> thought being echoed may not have been expressed in an utterance; it might not be attributable to any specific person, but merely a type of person or people in general; it may be a cultural inspiration or norm.
>
> (Sperber and Wilson 1989: 109)

They add, describing irony, that

> the speaker echoes an implicitly attributable opinion, while simultaneously dissociating herself from it. What differs from case to case are the reasons for the dissociation.
>
> (ibid.)

Hymes, who has discussed this problem of this definition of irony in his study of oral narratives, observes that irony

> when intended may not be echoic in a sense that implies a previous or standard use. An ironic remark may be novel. The ingredient of "echoic" mention may be an implicit comparison of perspectives, a comparison of a present situation to another in which what is said might be said, a possibility perhaps in the future.
>
> (Hymes 1987: 299-300)

The fact that an ironised opinion is not always readily attributable, since the ironist makes it the responsibility of the hearer to uncover its echoic nature and therefore its (actual or possible) originator, grants it the elusiveness and implicitness that have come to characterise its communication. Its recognition is thus constantly jeopardised by these properties. Its being an extremely context-bound phenomenon, involving norms and values whose evaluation and judgement is often relative, also contributes in problematising its recognition. A speaker of an ironical utterance can be said to 'borrow' it from another context in order to comment on the absence of that standard in the situation she is describing: the utterance is called upon to ridicule or criticise the situation at hand.

4. Literary discourse, interaction and comprehension

4.1 Irony and secret communion

Although of a special type, literary communication equally requires the interaction, necessary in written communication in general, between writer and reader through the text for meaning to be achieved. Unlike other types of communication, however, while the Reciprocity Principle holds at the level of genre, it is left to the reader to reconstruct the topic and the comment as the reading activity proceeds on under the presupposed guidance of the writer. "What is unique about fiction," says Nystrand, "is the temporary suspension and promise of reciprocity" (1986: 79). He adds that "whereas the beginning of exposition situates the reader directly in terms of genre, topic, and comment, the beginning of literature situates readers to a kind of text that gains comparable clarity only as readers work their way through" (loc. cit.).

The demand for reciprocity is observed all along by the writer, ultimately leading to understanding (between herself and the reader). The writer builds up a common base from which to start off the work in terms of which the reader will reconstruct what is to be taken as given and what is to be considered as new. Drawing on shared knowledge and bringing selected parts of it to the fore is a way of establishing its mutuality to both interactors and the means to distinguish the given and new distribution in the rest of the text. Besides, world knowledge and generic knowledge are activated to stir readers' expectations about the work and serve as clues and tools for the actualisation of meaning.

Understanding, however, according to Nystrand, does not take place from the start or following the steps normally delineated for informative expository discourse. In literary writing, no glossary or statement of purpose is normally made at the beginning of the work, for instance. No buttressing needs to be undertaken every time a new element is introduced. In the case of characters, for instance, it is generally left to the reader to reconstruct their identity from information gradually (directly or indirectly) provided in the course of narration. Usually, by mentioning a name, the writer seems to establish it as given in the story, as a common frame of reference with the reader from which to proceed.

Thus, because of generic constraints, understanding in literary discourse can be achieved only gradually. It is eventually reached at the completion of the interaction; when the writer's needs for self- expression and the reader's expectations of understanding are realised. All the playfulness with the Reciprocity Principle in between, at the level of topic and comment, is part of the requirements of the literary genre of writing, which include elements such as evaluation, suspense and anticipation.

In the case of ironic texts, a communion between the author and the reader results from this final agreement on meaning, when what has been assumed fits knowledge already available to the reader and what has been said proves to be necessary for comprehension to be achieved. Once the mismatch characteristic of irony between what is said and what is meant is overcome, the author and the reader's communion becomes a secret one. It is as if language is made to speak through itself: what is said is allied with what is assumed, to create what is meant.

Thus, the perception of the duplicity of the words by the reader reflects his close proximity to the author's point of view since it also reflects the amount of mutual knowledge that underlies the interaction. The fact that the reader has had to supply or draw on the particular information necessary for comprehension (about which the writer remained silent on the assumption that the reader would either know it or work it out) proves the accuracy of the writer's expectations about the capacities and the knowledge of her reader. The writer's management of the text in terms of given and new, what can

be assumed and what needs to be said, coincides in this way with her assumptions about the reader's knowledge, bringing them together while excluding anybody else who fails to recover and instantiate the intended meaning.

Hence, recognising the ironic nature of an utterance proves that the reader has been capable of going beyond what was said, supplying the missing components necessary for comprehension while staying in tune with the covertness required by irony with no need for the author to declare openly her intentions within the text itself. Usually, backing for an ironic interpretation is to be found in variably subtle clues inserted in the co-text or context by the author for the reader's benefit. The secrecy of the communion is to depend on how much is to be assumed and consequently on how much is to be left for the reader to infer or supply. The more is left unsaid, therefore, the more secret the communion between the interactors can be expected to be.

The amount of effort required for the interpretation reflects the amount of implicitness of an utterance and hence how much has been left for the reader to work out or supply in order to reach a plausible understanding. The greater the processing effort seems, then, the more silent the writer is about a particular matter, the more indirect, inexplicit and secret her communion with the reader.

In the same vein, it can be argued that the greater the processing effort needed for the comprehension of a particular utterance, the greater the number of readers who would fall short of spending the necessary effort and recovering the full pragmatic effect.

Secrecy, this distinctive property of ironic communication, thus plays a socio-linguistic role in terms of determining the type of relationship that links the participants. The less needs to be said, the more probable it becomes that they belong to the same group and therefore, the more things they have in common.

Excluding those readers who fail to activate or possess the knowledge relevant to the interpretation of irony enhances the secrecy of the communion with the writer. A communion achieved by those readers who are alert and willing enough to search for the meaning intended behind the duplicitous words. Booth sums up the point by observing that

> Whenever an author conveys to his reader an unspoken point, he creates a sense of collusion against those, whether in the story or out of it, who do not get that point. Irony is always thus in part a device for excluding as well as for including, and those who are included, those who happen to have the necessary information to grasp the irony, cannot but derive at least part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded.
>
> (Booth 1983: 304)

5. Literary discourse situation

Because of the generic constraints on communication in literary discourse, the discourse situation and the participants in the interaction acquire different functions and characteristics than they have in other types of discourse. A large part of the effect in literary discourse is derived from its multi-layeredness. Scholes (1982) declares literariness a function of duplicity in one of the components of Jakobson's communicative act. Duplicity of the addresser, addressee, context, message, contact, and code is a sign of literariness. The duplicity of the addresser and addressee can

particularly be brought to the fore in a study of the communication of irony in literary discourse, seeking particular support from Sperber and Wilson's approach to the subject.

Unlike the narration of history or other non-literary narratives, narrative fiction displays a complex discourse situation where utterance attribution - and therefore interpretation - can become problematised. The fictionality of the discourse is responsible for the drawing of lines between real life participants, the author and the reader, and the fictional participants in the interaction, with divisions among the latter delineating further complexities of the discourse situation.

The outcome is an interaction at two different levels of discourse. The first type of interaction exists within the work among its characters on the one hand and between the characters and the narrator on the other. Interpretation of these participants' actions and utterances depends not only on the reader's linguistic competence and knowledge of the world but also involves his coming to terms with the second type of interaction - that between author and reader; what the writer tries to do to steer the flow of meaning in one direction rather than another through a careful manipulation of the presentation of her as well as the characters' actions, thoughts and words. Keeping in mind that the writer and the reader are supposed eventually to come together as a sign of the fulfillment of the conditions of reciprocity, interpretation necessitates a continuous engagement in decision making about who said or did what and where the writer stands in relation to it. Whether to take an utterance or action seriously or ironically, for instance, can be decided only once possible interferences from other participants from the same and higher levels of discourse have been scrutinised.

Misreading is frequently the result of easy acceptance of prima facie statements or actions, disregarding the modifications that could have been revealed through a more thorough consideration of the interaction between the layers of discourse. Critical attribution of thought and attitude within the work is only realised at the author- reader level of interaction (Leech and Short 1981). Assuming with Sell that

> all texts address real life meanings from their creators to their recipients and a creator's estimate of the text's reception by its likely recipient can affect its formation,
>
> (Sell 1985: 498)

the reader will also act accordingly. He will look for what Booth (1983: 105) describes as "rhetoric in the narrower sense - elements that are recognisable, separable, 'friends of the reader'" to guide him through the steps of interpretaiton.

5.1 Participants and layeredness/embedding in literary discourse

As in other types of writing, literary discourse is undertaken between a writer and a reader over a text. Like all narration, it presupposes an addresser and an addressee. The problematic nature and consequently the difference of fictional discourse comes from the anchoring of these interpersonal relationships (author-reader) in other relationships around which the text revolves. The author can thus create meaning for the reader only in an oblique manner, through the text. In the same way, the reader sets up the hunt for sense aiming at the final (re)construction of meaning through that text.

Unlike other types of writing, the correspondence between sender and addresser on the one hand and the receiver and addressee, on the other, as Widdowson points out (1975: 47), is disturbed. The sender and receiver stop being identical to, respectively, the addresser and the addressee and distinguish themselves as belonging to different worlds:

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the former to the real world, and the latter to the world of fiction. A one-to-one relationship between author and reader is thus distorted by the exigencies of the peculiar interaction in which they are engaged, leading them to communicate through the intervention or mediation of other participants.

Clark (1987) devises four dimensions for language use, one of which, the layered dimension provides a rough depiction of what takes place in the case of literary interaction. Clark recognises the presence of at least two layers of discourse in literary writing. He assigns several parameters for every layer: "a principal, a respondent, a setting, a time frame and a social process the principal and the respondent are engaged in" (1987: 16). Successful understanding, according to him, rests on the recognition of the whole pyramid of layers each "nested within the domain of the layer just below it" with "genuine language use ocurring only at the topmost layer" (ibid.: 16,17).

The nucleus within a work of fiction is thus a fictional situation where characters interact with each other. They can address each other or even themselves (as in the case of monologues, or writing diaries). Their discourse situation is usually close to what is depicted in real life, except that whatever the characters do is eventually monitored in some way or other by the author. This layer is encompassed within at least one extra layer, that of the author and the reader. Such a situation brings the discourse close to eavesdropping. Yet it differs fundamentally from it because of the role the author plays in shaping the goings on in the story, rather than merely witnessing their ocurrence without her being able to interfere with any of its developments.

Similar hierarchies of discourse levels based on the binary polarisations of addressers and addressees have been devised by scholars working on fictional discourse to describe the interpersonal structure of such writing. A consensus seems to have been reached regardless of the type of metaphor used to describe the situation (i.e. layeredness or embedding), concerning the exclusion of the real author and the real reader from the actual discourse situation (Chatman 1978; Leech and Short 1981). Adams, (cited in Tan, 1989: 73), for instance, characterises the pragmatic structure of fiction in embedding terms:

W (S (Text) H) R

(W: writer, S: speaker, H: hearer, R: reader)

The writer and reader are thus portrayed as standing on the periphery of the discourse interaction, with a speaker and a hearer involved in the fictional discourse surrounding the text itself. They are further replaced by an implied author and an implied reader who are created to portray them in a manner that is more abstract and stable throughout the work itself and its life as a literary piece. Booth notes that

> the "implied author" chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices.
>
> (Booth 1983: 74-5)

The implied author is needed to perform the role of the agent to whom one can attribute the meaning gathered in the work, however controversial or implausible it might be. Assuming the existence of such a force governing the narrative might render unnecessary a lot of what can become mere speculation about the real author's views. The practicality of this division is pointed out by Booth as he observes that

> it is only by distinguishing between the author and his implied image that we can avoid pointless and unverifiable talk about such qualities as "sincerity" or "seriousness" in the author.
>
> (ibid.: 75)

The implied writer, however, needs the implied reader as the participant equipped with the right knowledge (cultural, historical, literary...) that would guarantee adequate interpretation of the work. Any requirements that are missing can result in pragmatic failure. Cases of irony, parody, and humour are frequently lost on readers who fail to recognise the extra reference needed for adequate interpretation. Ignorance of certain value codes echoed in a specific work because of cultural or historical distance, for instance, can result in serious misinterpretations.

The narrator, who is the participant next in line after the implied author, with a narratee for counterpart, and whose presence seems to be reduced to a minimum in in certain works, is equally crucial in the communication situation. Rimmon-Kenan says that "there is always a teller in the story, at least in the sense that any utterance or record of an utterance presupposes someone who has uttered it" (1983: 88). She defines the narrator as the "agent which at the very least narrates or engages in some activity serving the needs of narration" (loc. cit.). The presence of a narrator is more or less openly perceptible, but she cannot be made to disappear altogether. Her narratees, more or less addressed, are equally always presupposed. The interaction between them can range from direct address in a jocular manner to mere 'showing' accompanied by an elaborate camouflage of the narrator's voice.

The narrator-narratee level of discourse comes right above the level of interaction between characters. The two levels could, however, be conflated when the narrator is not only reporting things about the characters, but also taking part in the story itself. In Genette's terminology, a narrator is *extradiegetic* if she is above or outside the story she narrates, but *intradiegetic* or second- degree, if she also figures as character in the story. These two types of narrator can, moreover, be called *heterodiegetic* if they are absent from the story they narrate or *homodiegetic* if present. The association of extradiegetic and heterodiegetic characteristics in a narrator usually give her omniscience, i.e. knowledge of what takes place everywhere, at the same time.

These levels of discourse, as pointed out in Leech and Short (1981), can be conflated in the absence of a reason for the opposite. Besides, their relations are not stable and do not have to be binary; they can be asymmetrical, reflecting the conflation of levels on one side of the hierarchy or the other. On the other hand, they can be multiplied ad infinitum, reflecting the increase in the levels of interaction and the addition of further layers of discourse. Besides, it might be argued that the layers multiply with the depiction of every irony in a given work, as that presupposes the existence of some real or imagined originator of the opinion echoed for the purposes of ridicule or comment. That new participant, to whom the ironised utterance or thought is attributed, will constitute another layer to be added to the current discourse hierarchy.

6. Layeredness and irony

In defining irony as an unfavourable echoic response to an implicitly attributable opinion by a speaker in order to dissociate herself from it, we have so far considered it in the context of simple one-to-one utterances where the context is clearly delineated in the physical or linguistic surroundings of the interlocutors. It can be argued, however, that this approach is equally capable of shedding light on the way irony works in the complexity of literary discourse. The potential for incongruity in such discourse is a rich

field to exploit for irony, the practice which depends by definition on the duplicity of voice. This definition of irony can thus be functional in literary discourse in at least two ways.

First, it is applicable to the nature of narrative fictional discourse itself. The postulated existence of a minimum of two layers of discourse in literary writing seems to offer fertile ground for second-degree and echoic interpretation utterances. For whether a story is told in the first or third person, a certain distance is always to be presupposed between the subject who is narrating and the experiencer of the action. However close the two may be, the temporal distance conveyed in the act of telling alone is capable of betraying the disparity between experience and reconstruction. Being filtered through the eyes or senses of the teller, the report cannot help being tainted by the latter's perception of the matter. The repercussions on the description or report can easily be detected in the manipulation undergone by the language and the story (as opposed to 'discourse') during the process of reconstruction or 'redescription', in Rorty's terms (1989). Traces of the speaker's choices, preferences, and attitudes are detectable in the translation into the linguistic (written) medium of what was primarily perceived in another code. The gap realised between perceiving a fact and reproducing it in language is responsible for creating what might correspond to Scholes' (1982) view of fictional context.

A mismatch is always bound to occur not only because of the duplicity of code but also because of the remodelling the narrated event will have to undergo under the direction of the speaker during the process of formulation. The reaction to the other (self) is to be transmitted in the language in forms betraying the degree of proximity or distance achieved. Irony is a possible result in the case of a distance created to convey a non-positive undermining attitude of a certain view of the (possible or real) person subscribing to it.

At the micro level of discourse, that is, at the level of the characters and/or narrator, this kind of irony is frequent. It can be present in what seems to be a mere innocent description or report but is in fact silently directed against a character. The ironist in this case could be a character expressing disapproval of another character or simply trying to be amusing at the latter's expense. The ironist could also be the narrator who, for some reason, decides to colour her account with a touch of irony. In these instances, the irony could be perceived by the narrator, and of course the reader. The same character and one or more others could also be aware of it though not necessarily so. Jane Austen's opening of *Pride and Prejudice* can be cited here as one famous example of this type. While the narrator apparently asserts that "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune is in want of a wife", the question of utterance attribution is made problematic to the reader. Answering the question "Who is saying this?" is the task with which the reader has to come to terms. He has to decide whether the utterance is being used descriptively ("It is a truth ..., I believe") or interpretively ("It is a truth ..., somebody else thinks"). The latter interpretation is of course made more relevant in the context; the ensuing paragraphs reveal that it is the neighbours of the young man who turn out to be the originators of this opinion. The utterance thus is to be reinterpreted not as an assertion from the narrator but as echoing the state of mind of the neighbours, in order to draw attention to their corrupt opportunistic principles and simultaneously set the tone and the cautious and critical attitude to be adopted towards them in the rest of the novel.

Irony can also be directed against the narrators themselves, in which case they may or may not perceive the irony themselves. A narrator could be presented in a way that

undermines her actions, utterances and thoughts while a pretence of seriousness and support is apparently adhered to.

First person narrators are particularly exploited in this manner. For they are directly exposed to the reader by the implied author who betrays her presence by portraying her attitude to the narrator. The reader in this case is the only other perceiver of the irony - if communication is to be successful at all. An interesting example of this kind of irony is Ambrose Bierce's *Oil of Dog*, where obvious clashes between the narrator's (or his younger self's) value judgements and the established norms of behaviour bring to the fore the question of attribution:

> My name is Boffer Bings. I was born of honest parents in one of the humbler walks of life, my father being a manufacturer of dog-oil and my mother having a small studio in the shadow of the village church, where she disposed of unwelcome babes ... It had been my custom to throw the babes into the river which nature had thoughtfully provided for the purpose, but that night I did not dare to leave the oilery for fear of the constable. "After all," I said to myself, "it cannot greatly matter if I put it into the cauldron. My father will never know the bones from those of a puppy, and the few deaths which may result from administering another kind of oil for the incomparable *ol.can.* are not important in a population which increases so rapidly".

The assumption that the higher the level of discourse of the participants, the more knowledge they are entrusted with, thus explains why it is easier for these participants to perceive ironies about which others (from lower discourse levels) could be left in the dark. Conversely, the higher the level at which irony occurs, the less participants will be cognisant of it and consequently the more private it becomes. In the final analysis, the communication of irony can be legitimately described in terms of a secret communion taking place at the higher level of discourse, at the author- reader level of communication, above the heads of all other participants.

The second manner in which the cited definition of irony is applicable to literary discourse springs from the very distinguishability of the discourse levels. The potential for disparity in the discourse can be met by a corresponding potential for disparity in values and opinions. The possibility of a clash between values at one level and others at the one below it can result in irony. A character or narrator can become the butt of irony as soon as their standard of values is proved defective. That can be achieved by depicting it in an undermining context elaborated for that purpose by the addresser at the higher level of discourse. Its inappropriateness, falsity or absurdity will be highlighted because of the contrast they offer to the background of appreciated values already established in the work, or presupposed to exist in the mind of the reader. A certain distance automatically obtains. The withdrawal or the absence of support for the participant from their higher level counterpart, leaves their actions and beliefs in a critical position, liable to be tainted with irony. As we have argued, irony is thus capable of expanding the discourse hierarchy. This can be achieved in two ways. Either by adding an extra layer to discourse by leaving the subject of irony at the discourse level in which it is detected and creating another higher one to which the intention of irony is to be attributed. Conversely, when the level of the ironist already exists, another discourse level, a lower one this time, is to be created to accommodate the originator (actual or possible) of the echoed opinion. In both cases, the description of the discourse corresponds to what Sperber and Wilson designate second-degree (more specifically, echoic) utterances, the utterances responsible for the generation of irony.

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The existence of this potential for distinction in the levels of discourse allows confusions of attribution to occur. Decisions have to be made at the level of the characters about what is believed by the speaker and what is being merely reported or echoed. Once this is done, it has to be checked against what the narrator and finally the implied author (when they are distinct) think or believe. For the disparity in the discourse levels allows for possibilities of transformation of what is perceived as descriptive at one level, into echoic interpretation at the other. The existence of a higher level from which things can be reported, and 'overheard', gives room for the discreet, implicit expression of unfavourable attitudes. The mismatch in evaluation between the participants at different levels of discourse can be responsible for generating irony at the expense of the lower one.

6.1 Layeredness and dramatic irony

It can argued at this stage that what is known as 'dramatic irony' can also be encompassed by the given definition of irony. In drama, where it is particularly effective because of the presence of a double audience (the addressees within the play and the real theatre audience), the notion of levels of discourse is more tangible.

The reader or the theatre audience becomes aware that irony is at work as soon as a character who, unaware of the fate that awaits him or her (of which the audience is previously informed) starts appreciating a present state, or some expectations about the future which, the audience knows, will eventually conclude in a manner unsatisfactory to that character. The presence of the audience at the privileged higher level of discourse in a situation that equals eavesdropping allows them the knowledge necessary for distinguishing what should be interpreted as an assertion or description, and what is to be seen as echoic intepretation.

What is descriptive for the victim, in the case of dramatic irony, is presented within a context that highlights its absurdity and inappropriateness, usually carefully prepared by the dramatist for that particular effect. The second audience - and sometimes characters in the play itself - are capable, because of the additional knowledge they possess, of perceiving the discrepancy. The utterance for them can only be seen as an echoic interpretation. The irony in this case does not reside in anything the character says but the fact of its being said in a context that undermines it, while drawing attention to a higher level manipulator responsible for the already known outcome. The manipulator, the dramatist, is the participant in the interaction who dissociates herself from the words of the character and draws attention to their absurdity and that of the faith or confidence of their pronouncer. A famous example of the workings of this type of irony is that in Macbeth (I, vi) when Duncan, unaware of the ongoing preparations for his death, comes into what will become the *lieu du crime* and says joyfully,

> This castle hath a pleasant seat: the air
> Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
> Unto our senses
> ...
> Conduct me to mine host: we love him highly,
> And shall continue our graces on him.

7. Summary

It has been argued in this paper that fictional discourse invites an ironic reading in two ways. First, it does so because of the very duplicity of code characteristic of all translation of experience into the linguistic (written) mode that is itself responsible for creating fictional contexts. This duplicity is in turn responsible for generating a duplicity in the addresser, because of the gap it leaves for her to fit her own impressions of the experience into the supposedly neutral report or description. Irony can be a means of expressing the distance and incompatibility filling this gap between the way something could have happened and the way it is expressed.

Second, because of the echoic character of irony, a reader is to back off during the process of interpretation from a speaker once irony is suspected, in search of the addresser higher in the discourse hierarchy to whom the utterance should be atributed. This addresser will be the participant to whom the intention of irony will be attributed, unless there is proof to the contrary. In the latter case, the quest continues still higher in the discourse hierarchy, perhaps not even stopping at the level of the author. For there is nothing to stop a reader, yet another onlooker possibly equipped with more knowledge, to read a given work ironically, turning its words against its very author.

Note

1. Here, and throughout, I use female pronouns to refer to the writer/narrator, and male for the reader.

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